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Still Missing in Lebanon

What is the difference between 39 and 7? Fickle media and an indifferent public.

With no more Shiites clamoring for television interviews and President Reagan engaged in another kind of struggle, the seven Americans kidnapped and imprisoned in Lebanon for weeks and months have disappeared again from the nation's consciousness.

Sure we care, if reminded. But we seem not to know how to strike a balance between the massive obsession with the 39 T.W.A. hostages and persistent concern for the much longer suffering of the seven.

There is tidier drama in the story of a random group of passengers, who could be any of us, plucked out of the air and thrust into the eye of an alien political storm. But the still-missing Americans are, if anything, more innocent: They were voluntarily putting themselves at risk in Lebanon to help its people, or to promote America's understanding of their condition. And they are now at even greater risk, held by faceless captors who seem determined to outdo all other Lebanese in anti-Americanism.

William Buckley, a political officer at the American Embassy in Beirut, disappeared 16 months ago. The Rev. Benjamin Weir, a Presbyterian minister, was kidnapped more than 14 months ago. The librarian at Beirut's American University, Peter Kilburn, has been missing nearly eight months; the director of the university's hospital, David Jacobsen, for two months; the dean of agriculture, Thomas Sutherland, for five weeks. The Rev. Lawrence Martin Jenco, a Roman Catholic priest, was snatched more than six months ago; Terry Anderson, the chief Middle East correspondent of The Associated Press, more than four months ago.

The State Department has been imploring Syria and the Shiites led by Nabih Berri to work as hard for their release as they did for the T.W.A. hostages. And an Egyptian official hinted last week that a deal might be possible soon.

But why was all America swept off to the alleys of Beirut and the homes of the grieving relatives of the 39, while hardly anyone now mentions the seven? At least let the question haunt us for a while.